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Introduction: another point of view

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Equality, Participation and Inclusion

Diverse perspectives

Edited by Jonathan Rix, Melanie Nind, Kieron Sheehy,
Katy Simmons and Christopher Walsh

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Second Edition

A David Fulton Book



The Open
University

Chapter I

Introduction

Another point of view

*Jonathan Rix, Christopher Walsh, John Parry
and Rajni Kumrai*

A different approach

This is the introduction to the second edition of two books aimed at people with an interest in issues of equality, participation and inclusion for children and young people. The first editions were rooted in inclusive education and had a primary focus upon the experiences of disabled people in educational contexts. The second edition has broadened its focus to consider a greater diversity of perspectives and contexts, whilst maintaining those emphases from the first edition. This shift reflects a belief we tried to capture in the opening image of the last introduction:

What are we looking at? There is a nearly empty mug of coffee on the desk. If you were to look and notice it, you would probably think, 'That's a nearly empty mug of coffee on the desk'. If you were to move your head a few millimetres and look again you would probably think the same thing.

But what if you were painting a picture of that mug? Maybe, you'd think about the light reflecting off its surface ... after all, it is shiny. And what if you were allowed to drink only one cup of coffee a day? Maybe, you'd look at that mug and have a pang of disappointment that it was nearly empty, ignoring its 'mug' nature altogether. And how about if you couldn't see with your eyes but used your fingers instead? Would you know how much coffee was in it just from its outside?

However simple something seems, it will always appear different if you approach it from a different angle.

What are the experiences of children and young people? How do we think about the challenges they face? Who are they and how should we support them? Who should be responsible for supporting them? What systems and practices do we need to create greater equality, participation and inclusion across diverse settings?

Each of us approaches these questions from different angles and using different lenses, aware (perhaps after a reminder) that underlying every challenge and every solution are numerous variables which we cannot always know and predict, but have to be ready to acknowledge. After all, a mug of coffee isn't just a mug of coffee:

Who made the mug? Who dug up the clay? Who shipped the clay? How much did they pay those mug makers? Where did the coffee come from? Why do people in the UK drink instant coffee anyway?

And, of course, each attempt we make to answer the questions we ask, leads to more challenges, contradictions and unknowns; opening up the opportunity for further enquiries.

This ongoing process of exploration is at the heart of our development both as the individuals we perceive ourselves to be and the cultures in which our perceptions are formed. Like the coffee cup and the coffee contained within it, we are a result of numerous social interactions across time and history. Our practices and developing nature in turn feed the contexts in which we are. The view we take, the questions we ask, are both created from and create the contexts in which they arise:

A person develops through *participation in* an activity, *changing* to be involved in the situation at hand in ways that contribute both to the ongoing event and to the person's preparation for involvement in similar events. The focus is on people's active transformation of understanding and engagement in dynamic activities.

(Rogoff 2003: 254)

How do we see children?

The way we view children could in many ways be seen as hypocritical. Why do we place them in buildings that are generally poorly accessible, with varying quantities and qualities of facilities, and group them according to ability and age (often sex as well)? Why do we formally and informally identify/label and/or withdraw some who do not achieve targets or are perceived to be inherently different according to relative physical, behavioural, emotional, cultural and cognitive parameters? Why do we offer access to narrowly defined knowledge, which focuses on the majority culture's traditional definitions of what is important to learn? Why do we present our information in one language, structuring learning within middle

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class norms of behaviour, and then require diverse groups of children and young people to demonstrate their understandings within a variety of highly standardised and time constrained parameters, whilst informing them that their futures depend on their results?

Adults are not viewed developmentally in terms of ages and stages, so why do we try to squeeze children into developmental pathways? We tell each other through government sponsored programmes, university constructed courses and media soundbites that children are some contained part of humanity which exists from around about ages 0–18. There comes a moment when this development ceases and a fully fledged adult emerges, capable, responsible and with meaningful rights. Yet, when we stop, when we think, when we question, we know that this is just not true. Some children are incredibly capable and responsible – if we give them the chance – from a very early age; some adults are not.

Can we start from here?

Although many settings are more attuned to issues of equality, participation and inclusion than they were in the past, change is still needed to ensure that all contexts are more equitable in their treatment of children and young people. There is a long list of concerns. We still witness many settings that only enable access for people who can walk; issues of intellectual access are rarely considered; services for groups identified as being in a minority are typically added on rather than being at the heart of the mainstream; many practitioners find themselves within structures that only pay lip-service to joined-up working and inclusion; there is no systematic awareness-raising about children's rights amongst children or adults; children are rarely influential at strategic planning levels; practitioners are inhibited by a steady flow of new policy requirements; many practitioners find it hard to work in integrated ways that link or join up services to collaborate professionally; huge amounts have been spent on information recording systems which ironically take practitioners away from front-line work; the numbers of looked after children has been on the rise, with those in care more likely to end up arrested, pregnant, unemployed or homeless; exclusionary action is taken far more often against individuals from minority ethnic groups than those from the ethnic majority; numbers of segregated educational places have remained steady; many subjects within schools still involve streaming and setting; people with English as an Additional Language must still sit exams in English to gain any meaningful qualification; boys are more likely to get additional educational needs support than girls; children have no voice

in defining and developing their schools and their learning; and the list does not stop there ...

These inequitable settings across the UK are not going to be changed completely or quickly. This is neither surprising nor something that we should demand. What they should change to and how they should change is open to debate. There is not a perfect system awaiting us on the shelf. What there is, instead, is a whole raft of best practice principles and processes from which we can choose. Applied research shows us many ways forward that can break down barriers to access, learning and services to increase the chances of participation and inclusion for diverse groups of children and young people. These best practice principles and processes are not going to lead us to one model of inclusion and equity, however. They will allow settings and contexts to respond to the differing circumstances in which they operate in the manner most suitable to the people within them and served by them. This has been recognised for some time:

It is possible, indeed highly likely, that there is no single best structural solution for any given set of principles of good practice. There may be instead a range of possible solutions that represent various adaptations of principles of good practice to particular conditions.

(Elmore 1995: 370)

Our chances of achieving structures and procedures that are responsive to individuals means we must not be wedded to any aspects of the system as it presently stands. We must be prepared to adapt to the circumstances, in a way that takes account of its ongoing impact on those affected. To develop in this way requires a great deal of flexibility. Our systems need to be capable of adapting and continuing to be adaptive without diminishing their cohesiveness or accountability. This is a tall order, but one that we can move towards.

Nearly everything about the construction of our current social system is based on separation and segregation. It is not a system which is as well suited to the delivery of equality, participation and inclusion. It is not going to be changed completely or overnight, but change is necessary. Importantly, we can influence changes to the system by drawing on the whole raft of best practices and processes which are currently being delivered across services, professions and contexts. These successful practices often require teamwork and the building up and maintaining of relationships and trust. This kind of work allows systems to be flexible without diminishing their organisational coherence or accountability and without retreating to tick-box criteria and

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top-down targets. It requires us to consider and understand the perspectives of those who are affected by and who affect the system's structures and processes.

This book is an opportunity to explore some of those perspectives. It brings together the voices and ideas of some of those who have been or are currently excluded from and frequently disabled by the education system and wider social structures. It incorporates the work of activists and researchers, theorists and practitioners. It presents personal experiences and reflections alongside socio-cultural analysis. It considers the development of ideas and beliefs and their application in the past, present and future; and it presents warnings and possibilities to guide and motivate both our thinking and the policies and actions we undertake in the delivery of services to children and young people in the coming years.

A collection of perspectives

This book is divided into five sections. In the opening section, *Looking back: A personal experience*, four writers (Mabel Cooper, Micheal Giangreco, Heidi Mirza and Yvette Taylor) look back at the systems and processes used in their education. We see how some aspects of the system supported a positive vision of the writers' individual identities, but more typically supported the negative. It is quite clear how systems highlighted their differences to some aspirational norm, and how informal networks within and beyond those systems could exacerbate or counteract the dislocation and limited sense of worth and possibility which the authors felt.

The second section, *Looking forwards: The development of new thinking*, is premised upon the need for a vision to drive change. The first two chapters (Donald McIntyre and Len Barton) mark a point in history, looking at the pitfalls of the education system and why it needs to change. The next two chapters (Michael Freeman, and Emily Middleton) help us to consider the importance of children's rights and the participation of children and young people across social settings. These chapters remind us that we need to accept all individuals having control of their own lives, having a say in the running of organisations that represent them and affecting the processes of the institutions that dominate much of what happens to them and around them.

The first four chapters in section three *Looking from within: Barriers and opportunities*, present their authors' perspectives as disabled people, or seek to represent the views of disabled people. The authors (Richard Light, Liz Crow, Clare Connors, Kirsten Stalker, John Swain and Sally French) explore the ways and means by which we describe our society and the practices and

people within it, examining in particular the development of the social model of disability, its future and its possible evolution. The last four chapters in this section (Bruce Dorries, Beth Haller, Nancy Rice, Lorraine Culley and Linda Graham) examine how the ways in which we think about and describe difference can create barriers and opportunities for children and young people.

The fourth section, *Looking from within: The experience of inclusion*, has a specific focus upon the experiences of individuals within classrooms (Joy Jarvis, Indra Sinka Alessandra Iantaffi, Pat Sikes, Hazel Lawson and Maureen Parker). The chapters force us to question how we should best come to understand individuals' attitudes towards differing models and ideas, and remind us that often the responses we hear may not be the ones which sit comfortably with our own notions of what is and what isn't inclusive. The section concludes however with a chapter (Judy Bentley) which reaffirms our need to trust the children and young people within our schools and respect those who are frequently seen as the hardest to include.

In the final section, *Looking around us: A broader experience* we consider children's experiences in the wider community and with professionals (Virginia Morrow and Children in Scotland) and conclude with two chapters (Mark Deal, Jonathan Rix and Kieron Sheehy) which encourage us to examine our hidden assumptions and ways of seeing that may lead us to constrain other people. They provide us with ways to recognise that the development of the individual and the collective is an ongoing, interdependent relationship across time and contexts, and that the perspectives we bring to bear are paramount.

In editing this second edition we had to make some tough choices. It contains fourteen new chapters. Gone, for example, from this second edition are parental perspectives and the role of ICT. We did not remove these chapters because we felt they were no longer relevant, but because we wanted to include a more diverse range of issues and voices. This book is about *perspectives*. It is about learning from each other. It is telling us that if we wish to develop equality, participation and inclusion we must take time to explore our own views, to search out the views of others and to make sure that we listen to and act upon the issues presented. This collection reminds us that we all have multiple social voices. Our roles in the social context change across time and within different situations. This is a primary consideration when we are evaluating ourselves and when we are trying to understand and empathise with the people who share our systems, processes and day-to-day lives.

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